ACADEMIA ENGELBERG

Engelberg, 29 September 2005

4th Dialogue on Science is opened in Engelberg

On decision-making in the healthcare service

Western industrialized nations use a variety of healthcare service models. But all these countries share a common problem: Who decides which patient receives which treatment - between expediency and luxury?

According to Thomas B. Zeltner, Swiss Federal Office of Public Health (BAG), many industrialized nations report annual increases of between five and seven percent in the cost of healthcare. Yet each of these countries has a different and highly complex health system. For this reason a fundamental re-think is called for. This task was addressed with great enthusiasm by around 100 participants representing the worlds of science, business, politics and society in German-speaking countries. The discussion was not confined only to the question of cost. Models were also developed to explore in what way the systems may be fundamentally changed.

Everything for everyone, or what?

The participants elaborated a fictitious party programme “Healthcare in 2010”. There groups had the mission of supporting efforts to provide a comprehensive service along the lines of “everything for everyone”. The other three groups adopted the position “only what is absolutely essential”. The parallels in their presentations were quite astonishing: The “everything for everyone” groups demanded comprehensive healthcare. This is financed through a certain percentage of the salary and lean management, which calls for a single health insurance scheme. Economic elements have to be included in the training of all health service providers. The groups with the restrictive mission demanded a reprivatization of the healthcare service and efforts to foster a sense of responsibility among people for their own healthcare. At the same time, the compulsory basic health insurance is abolished

and the insurance form is decontrolled. Since politics shows it is unwilling to make decisions and take responsibility, rationing is essential according to this approach.

Paradigm shift in procedure

With this year's conference, the Academia Engelberg Foundation has continued its tradition: Not a run-of-the-mill conference, but an interactive forum in which role reversal and the defence of opposing opinions are now standard features of the procedure. All participants intensively embraced this "adventure" and showed great engagement in defending positions in the healthcare system which they would not normally accept. As a result they became part of a process aimed at understanding other viewpoints better. Or as Jakob Nüesch, member of the Academia Engelberg Foundation and former President of the ETH, said: "The converse thought process sharpened the mind for future decisions."

Outlook

In his paper on Thursday afternoon, Dr. Roger Busch, Institute of Technology, Theology and Science at the Ludwig Maximilian University in Munich, will take up the cudgels on behalf of freedom in research. Prof. Alois Haas will speak about the finiteness of life. Professor Axel Olaf Kern from the University of Applied Science in Ravensburg-Weingarten will discuss the question of the financeability of the healthcare system. Following these presentations, the participants will again break up into working groups. In the final round on Friday, the former Federal Chancellor Ruth Dreifuss will present some possible points of departure.

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